

headline blues

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headline blues

by [thanotaphobia \(blue000jay\)](#)

Summary

“You look happy,” Niki comments, as he slings a dirty apron over his work outfit. Tommy grins at her, feeling his face crinkle up in joy. The news rolls innocently, the bottom scroll commenting on an unsolved murder-suicide currently being investigated. He spares it a half glance, then looks back at Niki.

“It’s ‘cause I am,” he says.

(or, a sequel to Pouring Honey In My Ear, a look at unhealthy relationships and ideals. Read with caution.)

Notes

as mentioned in the summary, this fic is HEAVY. it will deal with heavy themes such as suicide, self harm, murder, and a whole host of other things. please read with caution and this is definitely a case of if you can't handle it, turn around and leave!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

a new day

Tommy thinks they were expecting something different.

There's this hesitance around the house, the first few days he spends in the Watson-Soot household. He can't go to school or to work— not with the handprint shaped bruise that lingers on his cheek and fades to a sickly yellow. He likes it, but only because every time Wilbur or Techno look at him, their eyes get this dangerous, predatory look in them. Like they're calculating.

Phil is a little more subtle about it. Tommy uses the icepack until they're not looking and then lets it drop, wanting to keep that look in their eyes just a little bit longer if he can.

They hesitate, as though they're waiting for him to ask to go home to Dream.

But he doesn't want to. He wants to stay here, in his freshly-painted light blue room with its soft white comforter and sheets, the plush cow on the desk and a whole wardrobe just for him. He laments the loss of his phone until Phil orders him another on the second day and he receives still wrapped in shiny plastic; they'd called out for him, so he didn't have to leave the house, and the tension rises as the days go by, as subtle as the tide. Days pass; three in total, and then on the fourth, Wilbur corners him.

It's too early for this, he thinks, glaring at Wilbur from across the kitchen and curling his mug of hot coffee close to his chest. He thinks it's the only reason the older man hasn't come over to him in the first place, the risk of Tommy splashing it on him and burning far too high.

"You're not leaving," Wilbur informs him, testing the waters. Wilbur likes games.

Tommy likes to be unpredictable.

"Okay," he says. He fixes Wilbur in his gaze. "I don't want to."

"You don't want to?" Wilbur asks. Tommy shakes his head. "What about your stuff? Your house?"

"Not mine," Tommy informs him. None of that stuff is his the way Wilbur is *his*, uniquely and perfect. Tommy will hold on to him until his fingers fall off, or they both die or something. Whatever. It doesn't matter how it ends. Tommy doesn't plan on letting it end.

"What if I said you couldn't leave?" Wilbur asks, stepping into the kitchen. This feels like a game of cat and mouse again— in a good way. Not the way Dream made him feel like a mouse. Tommy feels like the fucking *cheese*. "Locked all the doors?"

"I'd find a way out," Tommy says assuredly, fingers dry against his mug. Wilbur is still watching him. He's confident of that fact— whine enough to Techno and he'd give in, probably. "I don't want to leave anyways."

“This is a kidnapping,” Wilbur points out. Tommy scoffs. “Legally, at least.”

“I’d argue for staying with you in a court of law,” Tommy challenges. Wilbur bites his lip. Tommy decides it’s time for a subject change, now. “I want waffles.”

Wilbur blinks. The predator has turned into some kind of domesticated dog. No longer a wolf. Tommy hums, a little disappointed. “Waffles?”

“Yes,” he says. “For breakfast.”

He tips his head forward, juts his chin out just enough so that it looks like a natural movement. Tommy angles his head just enough for his bruise to really shine in the lights of this fancy-ass kitchen in this fancy-ass house, and he watches as Wilbur gives in.

Man. He’s got to find ways to get beat up more.

By the fifth day, his cheek is mostly healed— enough so that he can dab a little bit of Techno’s concealer onto it and be perfectly fine. He insists on going back to work and school. After all, Wilbur and Techno get to. Why not him? Phil hovers that morning as Tommy gets ready for the afternoon shift, but all it takes is Tommy leaning his head into Phil’s hand as he checks his face for the man to give in and agree to drive him.

God, they’re all so fucking stupid.

The diner is just as he left it, if not a little dirtier. Niki is glad to see him at least, opening her arms for a hug and happily chirping that he looks better. Tommy ducks his head, grinning the whole time.

He feels light. He feels happy. He feels good.

They have a TV above the counter— it’s small, one of those wall-mounted ones that’s white to blend in with the wall it hangs on. Usually they keep it on very low or silent, with captions, just to let the place have some background noise. Tommy likes to keep it on reruns of *I Love Lucy* or one of those dumbass black and white shows, but whenever Quackity comes in he always turns it to soccer. Jack likes soccer too, but Tommy tells him that he can’t even see it so shut the fuck up.

Niki has it on the news when he comes in for his shift and by the time they’re closing, it’s still running. He’d been ignoring it all day for the most part, but there’s only one family left in the back tables and Jack is running the dishwasher and the stoves are off, so. They’re technically closed. Closing. Whatever.

“You look happy,” Niki comments, as he slings a dirty apron over his work outfit. Tommy grins at her, feeling his face crinkle up in joy. The news rolls innocently, the bottom scroll

commenting on an unsolved murder-suicide currently being investigated. He spares it a half glance, then looks back at Niki.

“It’s ‘cause I am,” he says. Niki laughs, and Tommy grabs the empty dish bin to start clearing tables.

“Why?” she asks.

“Just feelin’ good, Nik,” he says jovially. “That cold knocked me flat on my ass, and now I’m just happy to be here.”

“Are you on something?” Jack asks from behind the steel kitchen shelving.

“Crack,” Tommy says, and Niki bumps his arm with her knuckles.

“Oh, knock it off,” she scolds lightly, but he doesn’t miss the way she squints at him. “Are you wearing makeup?”

“Bad zit,” Tommy says, and then quickly shuffles past. “Don’t ruin my mood, Nihachu.”

“Alright, alright,” Niki acquiesces, raising her hands in surrender. Her face flickers, but it smoothes over quickly. Her eyes trace his. “Get to work, kiddo.”

“Yes ma’am,” Tommy chirps. His fingers grip the plastic and he smiles, feet light as they carry him across the carpet.

He gets home late that night. The diner closes at 10, and Techno picks him up in the stupid bougie Tesla and drives him home. Drives them both home, the garage opening with an electric starter and the sky crystal clear and showing stars. Techno grumbles as he opens the front door for Tommy, complaining that he smells like stale fries, but Tommy knows the affection when he hears it. Techno shuffles off in the direction of the living room, waving a hand towards the kitchen, and Tommy is quick to go and search for food. He rummages through the fridge and snags a snack, munching as he peers out the window above the sink.

He pauses for a moment, caught up in his own mind. And then movement drags him back to reality, blinking as he recognizes a shape on the back porch. There’s a patio out there, concrete and wood panels, steps that lead into the grassy shade of the oak tree back there. On the deck is Wilbur, a jacket pulled up to his ears and leaning against the rail. Tommy pauses, then crumples his wrapper in his hand and tosses it in the bin as he makes his way to the back door and cracks it open.

Stepping out into the cool night air in just his socks, Tommy is hit by a wave of nicotine. He wrinkles his nose, padding quietly across to where Wilbur is standing.

“I didn’t know you smoked,” Tommy says.

Wilbur is quick to try and hide it— he brings his arm down, the evidence trailing from his lips as he waves his hand in front of his face like it’ll disperse quicker. He almost looks guilty, as

though he's been caught; truth be told, Tommy *does* mind.

"Oh, well," he says. "We don't know everything about each other."

"Not yet," Tommy says ominously, grinning just to break the tension a little. "Those'll kill you, you know."

"Believe me, Phil says it enough," Wilbur sighs, heaving a breath and then hesitantly raising the cigarette to his lips once more. Tommy watches. They stand in silence for a minute in the cool night air, Tommy feeling the breeze tickle against his feet and watching as Wilbur blows out another long stream of smoke. He curls his face up into a snarl as the smell reaches him.

"That's gross," he says, stepping forward to the railing in order to lean near Wilbur. He eyes the red, lit end of the cig with interest and disdain all at once. "Smells like shit."

"It's not meant to smell nice," Wilbur informs him.

"Do you do it often?"

"Once a month or so, I buy a pack. I smoke them socially, mostly."

"That's stupid."

"You're stupid."

"Not as stupid as you." Tommy scowls at that quip, and Wilbur's face falls just a bit. "Aw, Tommy, I didn't mean it."

"Right," Tommy says, and then holds his hand out. He watches as a few different emotions flicker over the older man's face, before settling on baffled amusement. "Gimme that."

"I'm not going to give you it," Wilbur says. "My morals aren't *that* twisted."

"Bullshit," Tommy calls. "I'm not gonna inhale that stuff. Just let me hold it for a second."

Wilbur hesitates, and then gently reaches out to pass over the cigarette. Tommy stares down at it as he passes it between their fingers, pinched between forefinger and thumb as he stares down. It's almost done—burnt down to the near end, fire a lazing orangey color as it glows like an ember in the pale moonlight. Tommy stares down at it, and Wilbur raises a brow.

Then Tommy puts it out on his bare arm.

"Tommy!" Wilbur yelps in alarm, reaching forward but the damage is done, the burn is there and Tommy grits and bears it because he's definitely felt worse. Wilbur is staring at him in shock, warm hands encircled around his wrist and forearm respectively, and he drops the cigarette from his hands to land on the deck between them. The end is no longer red—instead, it's been passed to his skin, a searing circular mark halfway up his arm that tingles. "What the fuck? Why the fuck did you do that?" Wilbur asks, his breath smelling like smoke and eyes a little wild and wide behind their glasses. Tommy glances up between them, giving the hands clenched around his own a look before tipping his head up and back.

“I don’t want you to smoke,” he says. “It’s cancerous.”

“You can’t put one out on your fucking arm, Tommy, holy shit,” Wilbur cries, twisting his skin a bit to get a better look. “You fucking hurt yourself!”

“Then you stop hurting *you*, ” Tommy snaps back. “And don’t say you’re not, it says in big fucking red letters how it can hurt you! Every time you hurt yourself I get hurt too, see?” He wrenches his arm from Wilbur’s grasp, only to shove it in his face. He shakes it a bit. “It hurts! I don’t want you to hurt yourself, I don’t want you to die! So stop smoking!”

“Jesus fucking christ,” Wilbur mutters, batting Tommy’s arm away while still being gentle about it. He looks a bit stunned, but a little bit pissed, too. Tommy doesn’t care— if he lost Wilbur to something as stupid as lung cancer he might just fucking off himself.

“Every time you smoke I’m going to put it out on my arm,” Tommy tells him. “So don’t.”

“What is wrong with you?” Wilbur hisses quietly, and Tommy takes a step back, tipping his head and waiting for his answer. “Fine, I *won’t* . I’ll stop.”

“Okay,” Tommy says. Slick satisfaction, gulping it down his throat like lemonade on a hot summer’s eve. It’s sour. It’s refreshing. Wilbur is still watching him, a bit wary now, and Tommy turns his arm over again in order to look at the burn. It’s a small circle, red and angry, and it stings like a bitch. He hums. “Cold water is for burns, right? Or honey?”

“Not honey,” Wilbur says, and then he sighs, a long-exasperated thing that makes Tommy smile. “Come inside, child. We’ll run it under cold water. Don’t fucking do that again.” As he says that, he swings an arm wide out and Tommy neatly tucks himself underneath it, like a baby bird under their mother’s wing. He fits perfectly there, Wilbur’s arm melded to his shoulder as they move to stumble inside. A warm line of heat, affection, plain and simple.

“I won’t,” he says. “If you don’t smoke.”

“Yeah,” Wilbur says, and the door shuts behind them, locking the cold air out and keeping in the warmth, “I won’t.”

As they run Tommy’s arm under cold water, Wilbur looks at him.

“What?” Tommy asks, looking back.

“You’re very strange,” Wilbur tells him. Tommy elbows him in the chest, but he misses and just kind of ends up flailing around for a moment with uncoordinated limbs and sending water spattering down the front of Wilbur’s shirt. Oops. “Hey!”

“That was rude,” Tommy says primly. And, “you deserved it.”

“I didn’t finish,” Wilbur hisses, wiping a hand down the front of his shirt and then clearly giving up. “As I was saying, you’re very strange, but in a good way.”

“That doesn’t make it better,” Tommy points out.

“You fit in, in places where you shouldn’t,” Wilbur says. “Like here.”

“Why shouldn’t I fit in here?” Tommy asks. “This is home.”

“Exactly,” Wilbur says. “You shouldn’t be saying that, not yet.”

“I’m very good at adapting,” Tommy tells him, and Wilbur rolls his eyes as the younger boy scooches forward in order to keep his arm under the trickle of cool water pouring out of the sink. His arm still stings, but only when he takes it out from under the chill. The small red mark has become less angry, and Wilbur waits with a bandage in hand for when Tommy decides he’s done.

“...did you mean it?” Wilbur asks. Tommy waits a beat, and then the older man continues. “What you said out there, about you hurting yourself?”

“Sure I did,” Tommy says quietly.

“I don’t want you to do that,” Wilbur says, as though it pains him.

“But you do it,” Tommy points out. Wilbur blinks at him. “The cigarettes.”

“It’s different—”

“Is it?” Tommy stares at him. “Just ‘cause your self-destructive behavior is *pretty* doesn’t mean it’s right, Wil.”

“You sound like dad,” Wilbur breathes, and then cracks the tiniest smile. “And Techno, too. Have you been hanging out with them behind my back?”

“No,” Tommy says slyly, which Wilbur is meant to take as *yes* and clearly does based on the way his glasses catch on the light and his eyes glimmer with amusement. He reaches out, wrapping an arm around Tommy’s shoulder and pulling him over to tuck under his own, Tommy leaning his head against the pressing line of warmth. Wilbur reaches out and turns the sink off, then carefully takes Tommy’s arm and begins to press the bandaid to his skin. It makes Tommy feel like a little kid again, and normally he’d complain, but it’s quite late and he thinks he has to make up for the whole self harm thing not five minutes ago. So he lets Wilbur dote, and he thinks maybe he’d gotten it wrong.

Wilbur is the one who wants to dote. Not Phil. Or maybe they both do— like father like son. Tommy’s not quite sure of himself anymore. He’d been so certain the first couple nights, but now he’s balancing on the precipice of uncertainty.

Despite that, though, he’s content. He’s clearly won this argument, whatever it really was, and Wilbur has conceded defeat through comfort and bandaids with little Transformers printed on them. Weirdos. Tommy likes the Animal Crossing bandaids better. Regardless, Tommy’s won.

He's won, because as they make their way up the stairs, still absently bumping into one another and trading yawns, Wilbur says, "You know I'd do anything to make sure you were safe, right?"

And Tommy turns around to face him at the top of the stairs, watching as Wilbur comes to a stop a step below him. They're on equal ground now, eye level with each other. Tommy tips his head to the side.

"You promise?" he asks.

"I promise," Wilbur says quietly. It's dark in the upstairs hallway, the only light creeping from the kitchen downstairs, soft yellow tones lighting up the space behind Wilbur as Tommy stands shrouded by the quiet dark, tendrils of void come to claim him as their own. He can feel the dark behind him like a physical presence, and he can see Wilbur in front like an angel, haloed by glittering sun. Slowly, Tommy holds his hand out in between them.

Wilbur glances down, his face twisting. "What are you doing?" he asks.

"Shake on it," Tommy demands, sticking his pinky out between them. "The promise."

Without fuss, Wilbur reaches up and hooks his pinky with Tommy's, smiling.

"Shake!" he demands, and Wilbur shakes their interlocked fingers aggressively.

"Okay, I shook," he says, pushing slightly upwards into Tommy's hand. "Now keep walking, we can't just perch here like birds, and I don't want to wake dad or Techno. C'mon."

He obliges, fighting back a yawn as they go.

Tommy slams his bag down on the desk and watches as Ranboo flinches.

School is shitty. Tommy hates it, actually, despite being really good at it. He likes English the best, math the least, and everything else is in between. English is a place for him to be creative, where no one scoffs at his stupid poetry or prose, and no one other than the teacher can read what he's thinking. It's a good class. Poggers, even. Other than English, though, school is lacking. There's not much fun in it.

Except for Ranboo.

Tommy likes Ranboo. He'd never admit it, of course—rather die, actually. But he does. He likes Ranboo in all his six foot seven glory, shoulders hunched over so that he's only six-five, wearing his skin like it's a coat yet to become comfortable. Tommy likes his sense of humor, and the way no one else likes them, so it's just the two weirdos in the back of class sitting with each other. He likes how fuckin' gullible Ranboo is, because it makes it easier to get away with things.

And the teachers like Ranboo. They think he shouldn't hang around Tommy, because Tommy is explosive and angry and mean, despite how smart he is. Tommy knows what they think, and he doesn't fucking care, and neither does Ranboo. He's Tommy's only friend, really, and they're both fine with that.

He hadn't always been Tommy's only friend, but. Things happen.

He can remember the fight like it was yesterday— explosive shouting, swearing at each other with all the curse words they knew, Tubbo storming off in a huff as angry tears streamed down Tommy's face. That had been the last time they'd talked, ever. The day after the fight Tubbo had packed his bags and moved off to his new fancy smart-person school without so much as a goodbye to Tommy.

He can remember that night lying in bed sobbing, Dream sitting on the edge of his covers gingerly. It had been a rare moment of consideration from him. He'd reached out and rubbed Tommy's back as he cried, hiccups and snot decorating his face and pillow.

"This is what happens," Dream had told him. "People leave you. It's disappointing, but love can only do so much, Tommy. Get used to it." And Tommy had just cried harder, Dream rubbing his back until he'd exhausted himself so much he'd fallen asleep.

Tommy much prefers Ranboo. He never argues back.

"Hi," Ranboo says, and speak of the devil. Tommy grins at him.

"Hi," he says.

"Were you sick?"

"Nah."

"Oh. You look like you were sick."

"The fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Uh— I don't know?"

"You're so weird." Tommy sits down in his desk, scratching absently at the part of the vinyl that's peeling up from the wood underneath. Ranboo watches him, squinting his eyes.

"You sure you weren't sick?" he asks again, and Tommy rolls his eyes.

"I wasn't sick," he insists. "I just had to take some days off."

"Because...?"

"Because of nunya."

"I'm not falling for that again," Ranboo says, leaning back and crossing his arms. Above them, the bells rings, loud chimes echoing through the halls of the school as kids file into

classrooms and chatter settles down.

“You’re boring,” Tommy informs him, kicking his feet up onto the metal rungs of the desks and watching as Ranboo tries to cram his mega-long legs under his own desk, finally giving up and letting them stretch out into the space between. They’re in the back, it’s fine.

“I like being boring,” Ranboo says happily. “It’s easy.”

“You’re easy.”

“You need to come up with new material.”

“Fuck off,” Tommy says, turning his face to the front of the classroom as their teacher shuts the door. He’s smiling, though. While having five days (technically three, since two of them were weekends) off of school was nice, he did miss having Ranboo around. And he’s particularly chipper due to his home situation having shifted so much— today, the sun is shining, the sky is blue, and Ranboo is looking at him with a similarly amused grin. Their teacher is handing back quizzes from last Monday, and Tommy’s got an A+.

Shit’s fantastic.

“So, really,” Ranboo asks, walking beside Tommy as they both head toward the library. One reason they’re friends is because of their near-identical schedules. It’s convenient. “Where were you?”

“I fell,” Tommy lies easily. “Hit my head, bruised up my face, gave myself a concussion. The whole nine yards.”

“Jesus, Tommy!” Ranboo comes up and around him, slowing them to a crawl in the middle of the hallway. “Are you okay? Should you be here right now?”

“I’m fine,” Tommy reassures him. “I’ve got a yellow spot on my head, sure, but concealer is great. Makeup is awesome. You should try it sometime, big man.”

“That— okay, that was not the best phrasing, wow, thanks— but still, Tommy. Are you sure you’re okay?” Ranboo slows even more until they’re practically at a standstill, and Tommy rolls his head back to let out the most exasperated sigh he can muster.

“I’m fine,” he insists. “The doctor cleared me.” Another lie, but Ranboo would never know. Besides, Tommy doesn’t plan on showing up to school beaten to a pulp anymore. Not like they noticed anyways. Ranboo’s eyes search his face like he’s some enigma, flicking from one side to the other like maybe he’ll be able to spot the hasty blotted cream he’d smashed onto his cheek this morning with a beauty blender. Whatever he’s looking for, though, he doesn’t find it. Tommy holds steadfast.

“Okay,” he says. Tommy shoots him a grin. Lying comes easily these days, like it’s second nature for the boy with a snake in his skull. He knows it’s not a good thing to do, but genuinely he’s not sure how Ranboo would react if he told the truth. They keep walking, and

Tommy takes a moment to glance up at him, eyes set forward and occasionally darting down to meet Tommy's gaze. They make an odd pair. Would Ranboo pity him, if Tommy told him about what Dream did to him? Would his eyes shine with sympathy instead of amusement? And if Tommy told Ranboo about what he did and the Watson-Soots, would he still pity him?

Maybe Ranboo would be shocked. Maybe he'd be repulsed instead. Tommy had lied and manipulated and cheated his way into a loving home with a loving family, inserting himself into the middle of their dynamic without so much a care for their thoughts about it. Maybe Ranboo would be impressed.

Or frightened.

Tommy thinks, occasionally, a lie is necessary. Sure, he lies for fun and brevity all the time, but some lies are meant to keep the peace. A man doesn't tell his wife she looks fat in that dress. Tommy doesn't tell Ranboo about the abuse he's suffered and the things he did to escape it.

All's well that ends well. ...Fucking Shakespeare.

Dream is outside the school.

Dream is *outside* the *school* .

"Are you shitting me," Tommy hisses, ducking his head and darting behind one of the wide pines that litter the scrap of grass that leads to the buses. Ranboo isn't with him— they don't have last period together, so they meet on the steps by the car pickup area after the last bell, and Tommy is so grateful now that they don't have last period together. Because Dream is here, and he's stalking around with a pissed off look in his eye and his hands shoved in his pockets as kids flow around him like water. Tommy takes a moment to hide behind the tree and breathe. He's fine! He's fine. He has to be fine, because Dream is here and Tommy needs to deal with it before he finds Ranboo otherwise there will be so many questions. Tommy pokes his head out from behind the tree for a split second and scans the area to find Dream again, eyes skipping over kids and buses and the couple making out by the lamppost, and there—

There he is, staring right at Tommy.

Well, shit.

They look at each other, and Tommy swallows. He expects to feel frightened. He thinks he should be all choked up right about now, with cotton shoved into his throat so roughly he can't even scream through it.

But he doesn't. He feels... strangely invincible. The talk with Wilbur the other night had helped, he thinks. The promise. After a second of staring, Tommy breaks out from behind the tree and starts walking over towards Dream, a silent idea already settling in the back of his mind.

"Tommy," he says as Tommy approaches, his backpack slung over one shoulder so he looks casual. The backpack is new. So are all his clothes— he watches how Dream's gaze catches on them, twisting into a scowl. "I'm calling the fucking police if you don't come home."

Christ, right to the point. "Yeah?" Tommy asks as he stands there, and suddenly, he realizes he's *not scared*. Maybe a week ago he would've been. But not now. "Why?"

"You're technically missing," he says, and Tommy nods, agreeing. He is. "I'm your legal guardian. If you don't come home with me—"

"You'll what?" Tommy cuts him off. Both of them fall silent at his impudence, but then Tommy swallows whatever remaining sticky fear lingers and keeps going. "I don't think you have any power anymore, Dream. You said you lost me the other night. I think you were right."

"I'll call the *fucking police*—"

"And if you call the police, I'll kill myself."

Dream stares at him.

"You don't mean that," he says. Fury like a snarling wolf. Tommy is too big to be his anymore.

"If you call the police," Tommy says, careful and slow like he's talking to a toddler or maybe Technoblade, "I'll find the closest gun and blow my fucking brains out. You want me. You *need* me. And I don't need you."

"You're bluffing—" Dream says and there is a waver in his voice. Genuine.

"Am I?" Tommy leans in, tipping his head up just slightly to get in his former guardian's face. "Because I'd rather fucking die than ever go home with you again. And if you call the police and try to make me, I'll just kill myself, and you'll lose me either way. And not only will *you* lose me, but my friends will too, and they're not exactly the most stable people, if I'm honest. So. Your choice."

He lets it sit for a moment. And then with that, Tommy turns and heads towards the stairs. He can see Ranboo up there, waiting for him. He adds a little skip in his step, letting a smile settle over him as he goes, victorious. God, he loves winning. It's the best feeling. Today really is an amazing day. He can feel Dream's eyes on him as he settles next to Ranboo, slinging his bag off to thump by his feet as he sits on the stone stairs beside the other. Ranboo, who curiously looks between him and Dream.

"Who was that?" He asks.

“No one,” Tommy says.

“It seemed kind of important,” Ranboo says, but Tommy just waves a hand and cuts him off.

“It wasn’t,” he says, and then glances back over his shoulder at Dream. Dream, who is standing there furious but unmoving. Tommy raises one hand where Ranboo can’t see and shapes it into a finger gun, shoving his fore and middle fingers into his mouth and pulling the imaginary trigger.

Dream’s face remains still and impassive, and then slowly, he turns and gets back into his car. Tommy grins, and then turns back to Ranboo with a giddy bounce.

“So,” he says before Ranboo can ask, “how was bio?”

Wilbur shows up after Ranboo’s been picked up, thankfully. Tommy doesn’t want to have to deal with that conversation just yet. He hops and skips over to the car, throwing his backpack into the passenger seat and then joining it with a ferocious grin.

“You look pleased,” Wilbur says fondly, fingers tapping on the steering wheel. “Like a cat who just got the cream.”

“Don’t imply I am a creamy cat,” Tommy fires back. “What is wrong with you?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Wilbur says with a laugh. “Seatbelt.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Tommy snaps the clip into the seat and Wilbur in turn, tears away from the curb. While Techno is overly cautious in his driving skills, Wilbur is entirely opposite, reckless and wild. Tommy prefers Wilbur’s driving to Techno’s. It makes him feel like a fireplace, warm and crackly and wild, but still contained. Plastic enshrouds him like stone to flame, the hum of an engine instead of the shifting of carbon logs. He’s still riding off the high of seeing Dream from earlier, and he kicks up his feet and leans back to stare out the window as they drive away from the school. “Ever crashed?” he asks, and Wilbur hums.

“No,” he says. “Never. Are you scared?”

“No,” Tommy says honestly.

“I can slow down,” Wilbur offers. Tommy just shakes his head.

“Don’t,” he requests. The car keeps its pace, and Tommy grins, his own reflection flickering back at him in the window. “Can you go faster?”

“No, sorry,” Wilbur says with a laugh, shaking his head when Tommy glances over at him. “Speed limit’s forty-five and I’m already going sixty. Not worth it.”

“Pussy,” Tommy says, not unkindly.

“I’m gonna kick your ass,” Wilbur says. Then, he pauses, glancing over. “When we get– oh hold on,” Wilbur says, fingers making grabby hands towards the stereo. “Turn this up.”

Tommy dutifully does, the grinding of guitar filling the air between them as Wilbur bobs his head and shifts from side to side in his seat. He hums along with the tune, and Tommy turns it up just a little bit more, grinning slightly.

It's the eighties, through and through. Big hair and ripped jean jackets, the crooning voice of Bon Jovi reverberating throughout the whole car. Tommy doesn't know the lyrics to this part, but Wilbur does, mouthing along with them as they pass by suburbia in all its grand glory. Tommy rolls down the window, letting the cool air catch his hair and ruffle it up. Wilbur is grinning when he glances over, and then reaches out and *cranks* the volume, Tommy laughing as he stuffs his hands over his ears.

“Shot through the heart!” Wilbur sings, with his full chest, voice dipping low on the *love* of the next lyric. Tommy is still laughing, but he takes his hands down off his ears in order to strum an imaginary guitar, furiously picking at invisible strings and then banging on a drum set that doesn't exist. Wilbur sings along with the chorus, and Tommy echoes– *you give love a bad name, bad name!*

The wind makes his cheeks go pink, out of breath from laughter and shout-singing. Wilbur is vibrating in his seat, the speakers so loud the whole car shakes with the bass line. Tommy can see the side mirrors trembling, and he slams his hands down on the dashboard to mark out the beat furiously. Kicking his feet up, leaning back in his seat and hollers: “I play my part, and you play your game–”

“You give love,” Wilbur croons, and Tommy chokes on a laugh at his impression, “a bad name.”

“Bad name!”

He's sure they're causing some kind of public disturbance, but he can't conjure up the wherewithal to care.

“You give loooove,” Wilbur sings loudly, badly, and they pull into the driveway of their house. Neither of them move though as Wilbur slams the car into park and Tommy slams his hands together, clapping with the beat.

“Shot through the heart!” he whoops, and Wilbur joins in, both of them shout-singing frantically, leaning over the middle as Tommy swings his invisible guitar over his shoulder again and rams out a couple rough-and-tumble riffs, Wilbur headbanging until his hair poofs up like an alarmed cat. The car is rocking around them as the radio is turned up even farther, until it physically can't anymore, and Tommy's throat is sore. His chest is heaving as they both wheeze out the last few lyrics, and then the music trails off. Tommy gives his imaginary guitar one last strum and then lets his hands fall to his sides, drawing his knees up to his chest. Wilbur jumps when the radio announcer's voice blasts out of the speakers and he's quick to turn it back down– they catch each other's gaze, and caught in the moment, Tommy

lets out a whistle of laughter. Wilbur's own face splits into a grin and they both lean back in their seats, cackling so hard Tommy sees stars. He's buzzed on air this afternoon, the feeling of victory so intoxicating it's hard not to celebrate. Wilbur is still giggling beside him as Tommy comes down off of it, snickering and wiping his face with his sleeve as he shoves his feet back down onto the floor by his backpack.

"Good fucking song," Wilbur says cheerfully, his voice a little hoarse. Tommy snickers. "You play guitar?"

"Only imaginary ones," Tommy admits, lifting his arms to strum against his chest. Wilbur smiles, the radio now playing some stupid pop song that quickly lulls into background noise.

"I could teach you sometime," Wilbur offers. Tommy looks over at him, raises a brow. The older man looks hilarious; face red, hair mussed, the keys still in the ignition as they sit in the driveway.

"You serious?" Tommy asks. Wilbur nods. Tommy knows Wilbur plays— he's heard some of his songs, knows he writes lyrics and music and creates.

"Deadly," Wilbur assures, and then snorts like it's a joke. "You're a natural. I can already tell."

"Oh, shut up," Tommy says, letting his head loll to the side as he peers out across rows of the same cookie-cutter front lawn of his new home. His cheeks flush. "Bet I'm not."

"Bet you are." Wilbur turns the car off, the engine shutting down, the radio disappearing. "Homework?"

"Nothing important."

"Liar. Do your homework first, and then when it's done and you've had Techno check it over I'll teach you guitar."

"Techno?" Tommy turns his head back to Wilbur, watching him unbuckle his seatbelt and then lean over to unbuckle Tommy's, too. "I'm not six. I can do my own homework."

"He always helped me with mine. He's smart, it'll be good for you." Wilbur smiles at him, hitting the unlock button and then cracking the door open.

"*I'm* smart," Tommy shoots back, finally shifting to open his own door and get out, swinging his backpack onto his back.

"So am I, and yet, Techno still helped me. C'mon. Don't you want me to teach you?" Wilbur dangles the treat of a music lesson over his head like he's a dog, but Tommy bets if he keeps begging he'd give it to him anyways. And he never makes mistakes with his homework— it's a short paragraph response tonight for English, it's all he has— so he gives in without too much fuss.

"Sure," he says. "Whatever. Screw your conditions, though."

“There is nothing wrong with always striving for betterness,” Wilbur says as Tommy rounds the front of the car. He pockets his keys, and the garage door slowly creeps open, the crawl of bending metal and machinery grinding in Tommy’s ears. As it creeps open, Tommy is surprised to see Techno already in the garage, giving them both a glare that holds no real weight behind it. He’s on the small landing that leads up to the door, and Tommy is quick to get in front of Wilbur and bound up the three stairs, trying to nudge past him to get inside.

“I could hear you two screaming from inside,” he says dryly, not moving. Tommy snorts.

“Singing,” he corrects. “Bon whoever.”

“Jovi,” Wilbur says from behind him, and Techno shifts to the side to let Tommy through. “Bon Jovi, you gremlin. How do you not know that?”

“I did, I just said it to piss you off,” Tommy admits, ducking behind Techno and into the kitchen through the door. His backpack lands on the floor in the spot he’s already claimed, his shoes go in their spot next to Techno’s and soon, Wilbur’s— his things have places here, spaces to go and exist when he’s not around. There’s proof that he’s a living, breathing resident of this house.

If Dream had wanted him that badly, he’d have given Tommy something like this. Something worth keeping. As it stands now, Tommy is happy to abandon him.

(He’s not sure if the threat had been empty or not. The threat of suicide— it felt real, in the moment. He stands in the hallway now and ponders on it.)

“Tommy?” Wilbur prompts, startling him slightly. He turns. The older man raises a brow, and there’s the sound of a chair moving in the kitchen. “Homework?”

“Ugh.” Tommy rolls his eyes, but there’s a part of him that loves the normalcy of it all. This is a normal family, and it’s his. “Fine.”

They’re normal. They prod him to do his homework. Wilbur promises to teach him guitar, and Techno works in the kitchen, and they’ll all have dinner together later. So fucking normal. Like a movie!

Tommy has never felt so damn good.

He finishes his homework in record time. He is one speedy bastard— no one has ever typed so fast in such a short amount of minutes. Tommy is a speedster, number one at the keyboard races, hell fucking yeah. He’s doubting Wilbur will even be expecting him to be done so early, and he meanders downstairs from his bedroom at a leisurely pace, grinning the whole way. English is, without a doubt, his favorite subject. He’s just so good at it.

Techno is sitting at the kitchen table when he comes in— he glances at him from across the way, over the counter, and quietly notes the laptop and notebook he’s got beside him. He doesn’t appear to have noticed Tommy yet, which he uses to his advantage. It’s so easy to

make his socked feet quiet, soften his footsteps and slip across the tile like a particularly sneaky snake. It's only a second before he's behind the older man, his hair pinned up in a loose, messy bun, strands sticking out all over the place. Tommy tips his head and notes what he's doing on the laptop— a some kind of banking thing? There's a big number right at the top— and then Techno switches tabs and—

“Is that Tor?” Tommy asks, breaking his silence. Techno's shoulders jump and he slams a hand down on the keyboard, closing a few things at once and turning something else on, the sound of an older man's voice droning out into the air between them. Tommy blinks, taking a half step back as Techno frantically figures out where it's coming from, and turns it off. Before he does, though, Tommy makes out a couple phrases about Greek Mythology.

“Tommy, *jesus*—” Techno says, and Tommy snickers wildly. Techno turns to look at him again, leveling him in a flat stare. “What do you want?”

“Was that Tor?” Tommy asks, genuinely curious now. “Were you watching porn?”

“I— no, I wasn't, what the *heck* Tommy— how do you know what Tor is?”

“It's the dark web,” Tommy says. Techno blinks at him. “You know. Like. Drugs ‘n shit.”

“I know what the dark web is, Tommy,” Techno says, letting out a slightly amused huff. “How do *you* know what the dark web is?”

“I'm a teenage boy in 2020,” Tommy fires back. “Of course I know what it is. Where do you think I got all my trauma?”

“Not Tor,” Techno breathes, and then turns around. “Go away. I'm busy.”

“Wilbur told me to have you check my homework so then he can teach me guitar. What do you use Tor for? Are you a hacker?”

“I am not a hacker,” Techno says flatly. He ends up just shutting his laptop, sighing heavily. “Where is your homework?”

“Here.” Tommy hands over the sheet of paper his paragraph was written on, and Techno takes it, fumbling around on the table for a minute before bringing his glasses up to his face and settling them on his nose. He goes quiet, and Tommy tips his head. “Okay, but what *were* you doing—”

“Trying to read. Shut up.”

Tommy shuts up, sighing loudly once to get his annoyance across. Techno hardly acknowledges it— hardly says anything at all, really, the only evidence of life being the flicker of his eyes across the page. Tommy waits, standing there as Techno reads over his homework and then finally, lowers the paper slightly.

“It's okay,” he says. “I'm assuming the prompt was to analyze Reverend Parris, yes?”

“Yeah,” Tommy says. “He's a bitch.”

“You made that clear,” Techno hums. “I’d change it about halfway down– use the quote there, instead of where you used it at the end. And take out the word bastard, it’s too emotionally charged.”

“Okay,” Tommy says. “Are you a drug dealer? Is that why you use Tor?”

“I use Tor because I don’t like how other browsers track your data,” Techno says smoothly, handing back Tommy’s homework sheet with a sigh. “The government spies on you. Fix that and tell Wilbur I’m not Chegg.”

“No, you’re better,” Tommy says with a chipper grin. He tips his head and spots the notebook next to the laptop, a pen lying beside it. There’s numbers on it– big ones, ones in the five digit range. And beside the numbers, names. Some of the names are crossed out.

Casually, Techno shifts, blocking Tommy’s view.

“Did you need anything else?” he asks. Tommy stares at him, squinting for a total of three seconds before pretending that’s the end of it and grinning at him again, rocking back on his heels.

“Nope,” he says, forcing sweetness into his tone. “Thanks, Techno!”

“Yeah, yeah,” the other says, waving a hand as he turns back to his computer. “Go bother Wilbur.”

Tommy’s planning on it. He backs away, sliding his feet across the floors, and then turns to head upstairs and fix his paragraph. Once he’s done with that, he’ll bother Wilbur properly. And then, after everyone’s gone to bed and fallen asleep, Tommy will do some snooping.

He learned how to pick locks when he was ten.

He’s picked it up in the library of the elementary school, in a book about pretending to be a spy. It explained rudimentary ways of picking locks, how the tumblers worked and the ridges on the key, how to use a lockpick’s set to open up a door or a safe. Tommy had tried it over and over again on the door to the computer room there, tucked away in the back corner of the library with a few bobby pins until finally, three days into his endeavors, the lock had given way and the door had swung open. Tommy thinks that was one of the first times he’d ever tasted victory.

It hadn’t lasted. The second he’d used the trick at home, opening his door after Dream had locked it from the outside, he’d had to stay home from school for three days. And then the deadbolt had been installed, and that had been the end of it.

He’d kept the skill, though. Refined it over the years, practiced on small bike locks or padlocks he picked up, doors when he was bored and there was nowhere at the diner. One

time he'd nearly gotten in trouble when he locked himself into a utility closet at school, and the lock had been trickier than he'd expected. It had taken him almost forty minutes to get out. Thankfully, the teachers were dumb and nobody had noticed.

It is pitifully easy to pick the lock on Techno's door, and even easier to get into his desk. Easier than the utility closet. It's like they're asking to get pilfered.

Tommy is a pro pilferer. He'd make a great cat burglar, he thinks, creeping his way out of Techno's room with the man's laptop clutched to his chest, the blue spiral notebook he'd seen on the table tucked up right next to it. The man hadn't even moved as Tommy had gone in and out, dead asleep, chest rising and falling in a smooth rhythm. He slept deeply. It was to Tommy's advantage, of course— he doesn't think any of them expect him to be sneaking around anyways.

He flicks on a light downstairs, keeping a keen ear out for anyone moving around up there, and sits on the floor of the living room. The first floor of the house smells like spices— garam masala and curry powder, leftover from the curry Phil had made them all for dinner. It sits heavy and warm in Tommy's stomach as he cracks open Techno's laptop, and then stares dejectedly at the password screen, the light bright against his face in the darkness of the living room.

Right. He's a good lockpick, but *not* good at cracking puzzles like this. Hesitantly, he lifts his hands up above the keyboard.

Okay. Think like Technoblade. What would he make his password?

Tommy hesitantly types in: password.

Incorrect password. Please try again.

Well, shit.

Tommy flips open the notebook instead of trying the password again. It's easier to break into physical paper than a hard drive. He stops at the first page, then flips through a couple, then opens it to the back page, the stiff cardboard backing.

Scrawled in the corner with neat black ink is a simple phrase. *Computer: steve*

Fucking dumbass.

Tommy turns back to the laptop and types in, all lowercase, the name Steve. He hits enter, there's a slight pause, and then Techno's home page loads in. Tommy stifles his incredulous laughter into his elbow, snickering as he stares at a picture of a polar bear that makes up Techno's desktop.

"You are so stupid," he tells the polar bear, humming under his breath as he clicks around. Chrome, a couple other things are open, but not Tor. Tommy searches for it in the task bar, and— bam! He's in. It loads up, and as it does he takes another moment to glance through the

notebook. There are a few pages with just random strings of numbers, and he gets the page he thinks he saw earlier— names, numbers. He glances up at the browser, and pauses.

He's never used this shit before. Only heard about it, seen it through others. Tommy clicks around for a minute, fucking around, checking Techno's history.

It's all cleared, of course. He sighs. Then frowns, and goes down once, then twice.

Passwords.

He clicks on the extension, and a couple sites come up. Some are banal— a banking site, Youtube, fucking Webkinz for some reason. But in between those are some sites he doesn't recognize.

Slowly, with a small amount of trepidation, Tommy clicks on one.

It's a forum. An old-fashioned one, by the looks of it. Blocky colors make up different threads, a small messaging system in the left corner. There are a couple people online in a messaging room when he clicks on it, talking about random shit that he doesn't care about. It's hard to find the profile— when he does, it's just a random string of numbers for a username. Tommy scowls, scrolling down the page some more. One of the forum posts reads like a fucking dating app— 28 female seeking services? He snorts, and then, in true teenage boy fashion, clicks.

The post is not a dating thing.

He sits there, heart thudding in his chest as he reads about this girl. Some 28-year-old woman is trying to kill her abusive fiancé of two years; something subtle, she asks. Could you make it look like a heart attack? Can you do it and make sure he knew it was from me?

There are a couple comments underneath the post. Tommy's mouth is a little dry as he scrolls down and scans them over, and his eyes catch on a response. It's a post by someone with a string of numbers as their username, and there's a— there's a fucking button for him to edit the goddamn post. It reads, simply: *message me. B.*

Tommy's hand hovers over the keyboard, unsure of what he's discovered, exactly.

See, he knows. He logically is connecting all the dots. The notebook, which he now flips open again and stares down at a list of people's names with numbers next to them. Dollar signs. Names that are crossed off.

He never really asked how the Watson-Soots made their cash. He assumed it was inheritance, and Phil had mentioned something about online work. They were the type of casually rich people that meant you don't really consider it. They were low-key, and for a moment, Tommy is thrown back in time to when he'd first seen them come through the diner doors, Niki's voice, *they're... weird.*

Weird as in murderers?

Tommy clicks back to the original forums, licking his suddenly cotton ball lips. His tongue feels a little too heavy in his mouth, his hands a little too cold. A rush of paranoia crashes over him and he twists, peering over his shoulder at the dark staircase. There's no one there—it's just him, alone in the living room with his knees tucked under him and the laptop on the coffee table. He inhales and then exhales, slowly, shuddering, and turns back.

Maybe it's a fluke. Maybe he's making it up, or there's a logical explanation for all this. Tommy shifts the cursor over and opens up the messaging system, clicking around to find the DMs. It's not hard, and soon enough he finds the girl who had posted about her fiancé. There are details in her message, names, ages, addresses. The account he's on has messaged back, all technical talk and cadence in the letters that reads as Technoblade, unquestionably.

It's a bit jarring to be able to hear that dull monotone as he describes shooting a man in the back of the head and disguising it as a mugging gone wrong, but it's there.

Tommy swallows, clicking out of the messaging. There are no names there he recognizes, and the addresses are a state away. He glances over the rest of the DMs and pauses—there's another username like his, just a string of numbers. The last message sent there was a simple *ty fam*. He clicks it out of morbid curiosity.

Engrossed in reading the conversations, he misses the soft sound of footsteps on the stairs.

The conversation between the two users is clearly work-related, and Tommy tries to skip over most of the gory details. In between the lines is harder to read, but he finds little things here and there. A mention of food, dinner that they'd eaten a week ago. Pick-up duty. That's—

They're talking about *Tommy*.

And Phil doesn't pick him up from school, so that means these two must be—

“Tommy?” A voice rings out behind him, sleepy and confused, and he whips around to find Wilbur Soot staring at him, skin ghostly in the blue light of the laptop. Behind him is Technoblade, arms crossed and staring at him with an unreadable expression. Wilbur reaches out and flicks on the light—Tommy is exposed in bright yellow, caught in the act. He watches as Techno's gaze lands on the laptop and notebook, and Wilbur's shoulders go from relaxed and sleepy to tense, predatory.

Cat and mouse. Tommy swallows.

the righteous hand of god

They're at the dining table. Tommy is sitting, of course, in the corner. Farthest from the door, pinned between mahogany and plaster with a trio of whispering Watson-Soots on the other side of the table. They're all in their pajamas, and frankly, the situation is so ridiculous that Tommy is having a hard time not bursting out in incredulous laughter. Techno's laptop is across from him as well, closed now, the notebook sitting innocently beside it.

What secrets it holds. Tommy plants his elbow on the dark wood and shoves his cheek onto his palm, watching Wilbur's gaze snap over to him at the movement. He takes the attention and runs with it.

"I don't care, you know," he says, loud enough to drown out the sounds of their incessant whispering. Two more faces turn to him, Phil and Techno, one of which is more angry than the other.

"What?" Techno asks.

"I don't care," Tommy says. That is *such* a lie. There are three murderers in the room with him. He cares a lot. "Everyone's gotta make money."

"That isn't—" Techno starts, but Wilbur cuts him off, narrowing his eyes.

"Tommy, don't lie," he says.

"I won't lie if you don't lie," Tommy offers. Wilbur raises a brow.

"Deal," he says, and despite Phil's sigh and Techno's quiet impassioned plea for him to stop, Wilbur comes over and sits at one of the dining room chairs. The one directly across from Tommy. They lock eyes over the wood, and Tommy forces himself to relax, look natural. "Are you scared?" Wilbur asks. Tommy blinks.

"Should I be?" he asks. In truth, he's not really—he's more scared of the fact they would be put off by him knowing, and potentially kick him out. Kick him out and back to where he came from.

"No," Wilbur says emphatically. "We would never hurt you."

"What if someone paid you to do it?" Tommy asks, and Wilbur's face twists.

"Also no," he says. "You'd be too close to us, anyways. It would raise questions, and we'd have to deal with the police. It'd be a hassle. Not to mention we *like* you."

Tommy considers that. It's pretty logical. Behind Wilbur, Phil steps up to the table and places a hand down gently on the wood, watching their back and forth.

"Why did you steal Techno's laptop?" Wilbur asks.

“Curious,” Tommy says, shrugging. “And it was easy.”

“It was not—”

“Your password is Steve. All lowercase. You wrote it down,” Tommy says, watching Techno’s face crumple into anger, and then a smoothed-out version of disguised conflict. Phil turns a little bit and swats Techno’s arm.

“Techno,” he says scoldingly. “Change it.”

“I was going to,” Techno hisses. “It’s not my fault he’s a snoop. He’s seventeen, he should know better.”

“That’s true,” Wilbur says, leaning forward more on the table. “Tommy, we don’t snoop on other people’s things.” His tone is achingly patronizing.

“Fuck off,” Tommy snaps. They’re irritating him to no end— he’s already elaborated the fact that he doesn’t care and won’t tell, so why are they hung up on this?

So what if they kill people for a living? It makes sense, now that he thinks about it. The money, the expensive stuff, the willingness to spend it on Tommy. He realizes now that everything he’s wearing is bought because of it— his laptop and phone, his shoes. Blood money sinks between the thread and fibers of his pajamas, and Tommy doesn’t really care.

Maybe that should worry him more than it does. But he figures that the three of them are smart— they don’t kill people who don’t deserve it. He thinks of the woman who’d posted on the forum, the one Techno had responded to; her descriptions of abuse, how she has no family and is stuck with him, feeling like she has no way out.

Isn’t that what Tommy did, just in a different way? Sure, Dream’s not dead, but he’d cried out for their help in a similar fashion. It’s no surprise they reacted like they did, not when his situation was so familiar.

“I won’t tell anyone,” he says, because he won’t. He’s not going to give up this life for the world. Wilbur frowns, lips pressed together tightly. He looks back at Techno and Phil, and then at Tommy.

“It’s not just that,” Wilbur says. “Tommy, if *anyone* found out—”

“I’m not gonna tell,” Tommy says again flatly. How can he make them believe him? “I like living with you guys. I— I know you won’t hurt me, and I know you do what you’re good at. Look, I get it, okay? Sometimes you gotta do desperate things to get what you want.” His fists clench under the table. Yeah, he knows. “I’m not going to snitch on you. I don’t care.” He pauses. “... so, do you like, shoot them?”

“Tommy—” Techno starts, but Wilbur holds a hand up.

“No,” he says carefully. “It depends.” Techno makes a frustrated noise from behind him, but Tommy’s only got eyes and ears for Wilbur now.

“Depends?” he asks. Wilbur nods.

“Car accidents, drowning, suicide,” he says. “Covering it up is just as delicate as the act of murder itself.”

“We’re not initiating him,” Phil says loosely.

“I mean, it’s a family business,” Wilbur says, turning to glance over his shoulder. “You had no qualms about Techno and I.”

“You were older,” Phil says. And he doesn’t say it, but Tommy knows that Phil is indifferent towards him at best these days. He’s been too busy to hang out with Tommy whenever he asks, and now Tommy supposes he knows why. “It’s different.”

“He deserves to know,” Wilbur says.

“I do,” Tommy agrees, leaning back in his chair.

“Not the gruesome details,” Techno says, frowning still, but he’s not actively protesting or looking angry anymore. “That’s bad for development.”

“I’m a big man,” Tommy says, patting his chest. “I can take it.”

“No, Techno’s right,” Wilbur says, turning back to him. “No gruesome details. All you need to know is we keep food on the table, and that we’d never hurt you.”

“But you hurt other people,” Tommy says, and Wilbur, after a moment, nods.

“Occasionally,” he says. “It’s not a full-time thing.”

“Have you ever been caught?” Tommy asks.

“No,” Techno says flatly. “And we’re not planning on it.”

“I’m not going to snitch,” Tommy snaps, catching the undertones in his voice and the implied threat that came with. “I’m not an idiot.” If these three get caught, everything Tommy has now will be taken from him. He’d be thrown back to Dream, or worse, completely on his own. Tommy *can’t* survive on his own. That’s a fact he knows intimately.

“You’re not,” Phil says carefully, coming forward and keeping an eye on him as he does. He braces one arm on the table, looking at him. “But you are a teenager, and you have a very loud mouth.”

“ *Excuse me—*”

“He’s right,” Wilbur cuts in, before Tommy can be properly offended. “Tommy, you need to understand that if anyone knew, if anyone found out and went to the police, if anything happened...”

“I know,” Tommy says. “You guys would go to jail.”

“And so would you,” Techno says nonchalantly. Tommy snaps his gaze to him and glowers.

“What?” he asks.

“You’d be in cahoots,” Techno says with a shrug. “They’d prosecute you and probably win. You’d be covered by the family lawyer, of course, but he might be persuaded by us to make sure you’d lose.”

“Are you blackmailing me?” Tommy asks, astounded for a moment. “I just said I wasn’t going to tell anyone!”

“I just want to make sure you fully understand the situation,” Technoblade drawls. “Because I don’t think you do. You snitch, even accidentally, even without meaning to, and you lose everything. You’d go to jail right alongside us. So think of your words carefully in the future.”

“Jesus fucking christ,” Tommy mumbles, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms, staring between all three of them. “I promise I won’t snitch,” he says, emphatically. “I swear. On my life. I won’t say a thing.”

Wilbur glances up and to his left. Phil looks down at him, and then twists to look back over his shoulder at Techno.

“We’re not getting rid of him,” Wilbur says firmly. Tommy would argue for that side of the discussion, but he keeps his mouth shut for the moment.

“No,” Phil says. “No, we can’t.”

Techno sighs. “Whatever.” With one fluid motion, he steps forward and snatches the laptop and notebook off the table, clutching both to his chest. “Don’t go in my room,” he tells Tommy, who again, says nothing. He sticks his tongue out though, watching as Techno rolls his eyes in response and then stalks away to the living room. A few seconds later, there’s the faint sound of typing.

“Soo…” Tommy drags the word out, kicking his feet. “Are we done here?”

Wilbur looks back at him, staring like Tommy is a book in a language he doesn’t know and is trying to decipher. “It really doesn’t bother you?”

“If I don’t think about it, no. Not really.”

“It would bother most people.”

“Guess I’m not most people, then,” Tommy says with a wicked grin. It’s cut off by a yawn. “Can I go back to bed now?”

“Are you kidding?” Techno asks. He turns to Phil, arms crossed. “Is he kidding?”

“Mate,” Phil says. “You can’t just brush this off. It’s okay to talk about it—”

“I don’t want to,” Tommy cuts him off quickly. He moves to stand up, ignoring all the looks thrown his way. He can’t express himself the way he wants to, so just kind of shuffles out from behind the table and towards the stairs. “I’m not gonna snitch. I’m not gonna think about it. Things aren’t going to change.”

The Watson-Soots are looking at him like he’s crazy. Which is weird, considering *they’re* the murdering freaks in the house.

“I’m gonna...” Tommy hitches his thumb over his shoulder, already bottling up his uncertainty and shoving it deep, deep down. They wouldn’t hurt him. They would never— Tommy is their family, now, and he knows they love him. That’s all that matters. “Back to bed. G’night.”

He turns his back on them. Wilbur catches up a half second later and says— “Goodnight—” but Tommy is already beelining for the stairs. He crashes in his bed not thirty seconds later, staring at the door as he drags his blankets up to his chin and processes.

Killers for hire. Blood money. Family.

They love him.

Tommy loves them. He’d made them his.

That doesn’t change, even now. It’s just another piece of a puzzle that’s still in the process of being put together, edges snapping together over time. He knows they care about him. And Tommy cares about them in turn— Wilbur hasn’t smoked since they’d had the conversation that late night. Techno smiles whenever he’s around, and Phil is quiet but happy. Tommy can tell.

The blood on their hands doesn’t change any of that.

No one comes for him. The door stays shut, and no light comes creeping under. Nobody knocks, and Tommy curls tighter around himself. The blankets cocoon him, a soft respite from the rest of the world and its revelations.

At some point, he falls asleep.

They don’t talk about it.

For once, all three of them listen to him and don’t bring it up. Breakfast is tense, but Tommy pushes through it with a bowl of yogurt topped with granola and plugs his earbuds in, dancing absently to tunes as he rinses out his bowl and steals the coffee pot out from Techno’s hands in order to pour himself a cup into one of the travel mugs. He’s got work— the diner grind never stops, and he’s more used to the feeling of a coffee pot in hand than he is most things. Techno offers to drive him, but Tommy walks instead. It’s not because he wants

the distance; there's a nervous energy flitting in his fingertips that's hard to ignore, one that has him sizzling and snapping when Techno almost forces him to get in the car and makes him bolt for the street instead, feet pounding against the pavement as he shouts a goodbye and raises his hand in farewell.

The mood lingers— it's not overt anger, and it's not betrayal either, but it's something along the lines of those. Tommy ties his apron over his neck and glances up at the TV, which is running the news of an unsolved murder-suicide for the fourth time Tommy's seen.

He scrounges up the remote and flicks it onto soccer.

Tension builds up in his stomach as he desperately tries to busy himself. Jack's in the back today and Tommy works the register and counter alone for a while before Niki comes in, her warm smile settling him and unnerving him at the same time. She's so nice— but so was Wilbur, and he was hiding a secret bigger than any of them could imagine. What could Niki be hiding? Would she hide things from Tommy? He thinks they're pretty good friends, and yet... it's not impossible to think. It doesn't help that Niki is hovering around him too. She knows about Techno and Wilbur, since Tommy hasn't been trying to hide it from her. She knows that Tommy's not at Dream's house anymore, because he'd had to inform Quackity his emergency contact information was changing and so was his address for his paycheck. She knows.

And she's being weird about it.

The hovering and concerned looks when she thinks Tommy can't see her is starting to piss him off. She is hiding something from him— she pulls Jack into the freezer when she thinks Tommy is too busy to notice, but he does. At one point, he's so lost in thought that the pen he's holding cracks, ink spilling out over his fingers and almost dripping onto his sneakers. He curses, frantically going to wipe it off his hands and throw the pen away— Niki catches him there, sequestered in the back by stacks of clean glasses and plates as he wipes off the mess he'd made from his clothing.

"You okay?" she asks, and just the question pisses him off more.

"I'm fine," he snaps. It comes out harsher than he means it to. "I'm— okay."

"Are you... sure?" Niki asks. "You've been tense today, Tommy."

It comes with finding out the family you adopted happen to be contract killers. Tommy just scowls down at his own fingers. "Just tired. Didn't sleep well last night."

"No?" Niki asks, prodding, pushing, always pushing. Can't she just leave him alone? "Why not?"

"No reason," Tommy says.

"You're staying at Wil's, yeah?" she asks, and he turns to face her, snarling before he can stop himself.

“Yeah, and?” he snaps. “None of your business, Nik. I’m fine. It’s fine. Leave me alone.”

“I’m worried,” she says candidly. “You’ve been– different, lately. Tommy. Are you okay?”

“I said I’m fine,” Tommy says, forcing himself to calm down. It’s fine. He’s *coping*. He cleaned up the ink and now he can get back to work, ignore Niki for the rest of the day, and then go home and maybe go to bed. He’s exhausted and– she’s not helping, staring at him with a furrow in her brow and a worried look.

“Are they being nice?” Niki asks. “The Watsons?”

“They’re good,” Tommy says. “Great, even.”

“Are you sure? You can tell me the truth–”

“What do you want me to say? That they suck? They don’t, Niki. Stop fucking pressing me about it. I’m not different. I haven’t changed–”

“Bullshit.” Niki’s voice is more stern now. “I am not blind.”

Tommy stares at her. “Yeah?” he asks.

“Yeah,” she says. “I told you when they first walked in they were not good, and now look at you, coming in with bruises–”

“That wasn’t them,” Tommy hisses lowly, voice sinking a level. “Don’t even think–”

“What am I supposed to think?” Niki asks, throwing a hand out. “Now you’re yelling at me!”

“I’m not yelling,” Tommy throws back, crossing his arms. Niki gives him a Look, capital L, and shakes her head. Annoyance flickers through him, egged on by the discomfort and anger and everything else. It rises in him like a gunpowder charge in a cannon. “Niki, come on.”

"I just don't think they're a good influence on you, Tommy, I'm *worried* –"

"Stop *saying* that!" He sees red. A flash of white-hot anger overtakes him and before he can stop himself, his arm is moving, hand clasp a smooth glass and lifting it over his head and throwing. It shatters against the wall beside Niki's head– she ducks and yells, the glass raining down beside her like a summer thunderstorm. Tommy blinks, and in a moment he's back, staring at the mess and Niki, who's staring with wide eyes at the broken glass. Tommy swallows. His hands shake.

Niki looks up at him, and straightens up to her full height. She is shorter than him, and yet he is the one who takes a step back as her eyes glitter with upset.

"Niki, I–" What does he even say? "I'm sorry–" he starts, but before he can get more than that out, Niki lifts one hand and points to the back door. In the main dining hall, a hush falls over the room.

"Get out," she says. Her voice is even and smooth. Tommy stammers over an apology, an explanation, *something*. "I don't want to hear it, Tommy. Get. Out. And *don't* come back."

"Niki, please-" He's not above begging, but she is steadfast.

"You don't want my concern," she says. "And that's fine. But I will not let you get away with that shit." She points at the broken glass. "You're fired. Get out."

No. No. The diner was the one fucking thing he has— or, had— Tommy wants to rip his hair out by the roots, he wants to scream, he wants to throw another glass at Niki, he wants to cry.

He does none of those things. Instead, he wriggles out of his apron, untying it with shaking hands. Niki watches him struggle, not saying another word. He slams it down on the floor in a mess of crumpled fabric, and then turns and storms out the door.

Phil picks him up.

The car ride for the first two minutes is entirely silent. Tommy breaks it unceremoniously.

"I got fired," he says.

"I figured," Phil says, glancing up in the rearview. Tommy had gotten into the back seat, and he splays out there now, not even wearing his seatbelt. Phil doesn't comment. He just eyes Tommy for a moment before looking back at the road. Neither of them speak for another minute, until Phil asks, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"It's such bullshit," Tommy says, the words spilling from him desperately, fear laced with anger and upset. "I've worked there for ages and she just thinks she can send me out like that and I— I didn't— I know she was just trying to help but she never tried before, and that's not— that's not okay. That's not okay, right? It can't be." Phil listens silently, so Tommy keeps talking. "She thought you guys were hurting me. You wouldn't. You'd never, and I— I got so mad, I'm so fucking mad!"

"Mad at her?" Phil asks. Tommy knows he already knows the answer to the question.

"Mad at *you*," he snaps. "Mad at everyone."

"What did I do?" Phil asks innocently, another rhetorical question.

"You lied," Tommy says. "To me."

"About?"

"The murder stuff."

Phil sighs. Without looking back at Tommy, he puts on a blinker and gently presses down on the brake pedal. They slow until they come to a complete halt at the side of the road, and then

Phil puts the car into park. He hits the hazard buttons. Warily, Tommy sits up, staring at the older man as he watches Tommy in the rearview.

“Are you going to kill me now?” he asks hesitantly. Phil cracks a wry smile.

“No,” he says. “But you want to talk about it.”

“No,” Tommy says defensively. Phil raises a brow. “...yes,” he concedes.

“Ask away,” Phil says, leaning back in his seat. Tommy takes a breath and presses the back of his head uncomfortably against the door of the car, staring up at the ceiling.

“How do you do it?” he asks. “Not like— actually. I mean in your head. How do you take all the violent shit and put it to the side?”

(Glass, sprinkling down onto Niki’s bright pink hair. Bruises on his own skin, yellow and purple.)

“It’s complicated,” Phil says. He pauses, then continues: “It’s called compartmentalization. It’s not something I can just... explain.”

“Try,” Tommy demands.

“I isolate the part of me that cares,” Phil says lightly. “I take the emotions and push them away. It’s not easy at first, but it evolves over time. Soldiers do it, as do normal, regular people. EMTs. ER nurses. Police. People with PTSD. It’s a defense mechanism in your mind.”

“So you just... train yourself not to care?” Tommy asks.

“No,” Phil says. “We train ourselves to put away the part that cares until we’re done.”

“Do you care about me?” Tommy asks. Phil glances back at him properly now— not just in the mirror, but he twists in his seat, an elbow on the center console as he looks back at Tommy.

“Wilbur cares for you,” he says. Tommy’s anger has slowly been leeching out of him since he exploded at Niki, and now he just feels a little hollow. A little empty. Like some part of him has been locked away.

“And you care about Wilbur,” Tommy says.

“And you,” Phil admits gently. “I do.”

“You’re not good at showing it,” Tommy says accusingly, and Phil just shrugs.

“Techno and Wil are used to it,” he says, turning back around in his seat. “You’ll have to adjust.”

“What if I want you to adjust to me?” Tommy asks, and it comes out more whiny than he would’ve liked, but if it works it works.

“Then I suppose we’ll meet halfway,” Phil says, taking the car out of park and pulling away slowly from the curb. “Or neither of us will move at all.”

“Great,” Tommy drawls, sliding further down as the car picks up speed. He stares at the ceiling and then shuts his eyes. He wants a hug. He knows Phil won’t give him one, so he resolutely decides to wait until they get home and then demand one from Wilbur or Techno. He’ll cling if he has to, like a baby koala. That empty feeling inside of him grows and grows, until not much is left but exhaustion. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Phil says. The car hums.

He texts Niki an apology that night.

She doesn’t reply.

Now that Tommy isn’t working at the diner anymore, he finds himself with more free time than ever before.

There’s no one hovering over him, making sure his social life is all but barren. No one demanding he stays home and studies, no one telling him to make money or starve. He has everything he could ever want (except his job back, Quackity had been firm about that) and that means that he has so much time to just dick around.

For the first time ever, he hangs out with Ranboo outside school. He can’t ignore the way Ranboo looks at him when he suggests it, the surprise lingering on his face long after Tommy brings it up. He asks him over and over if he’s sure, if they really want to, if Tommy’s not busy, and Tommy tells him to shut the fuck up and let’s go do whatever teenagers do.

Tommy’s not really sure what teenagers do, so he follows Ranboo’s lead that afternoon after texting Wilbur that he doesn’t need to be picked up, both of them walking down the road with their backpacks on and the cold air nipping their noses. It’s late October and the trees are orangey-brown with death, winter on its way. Ranboo leads them both down the road and across from the elementary school, where the swings are empty and rock a little in the wind. They find themselves sitting on them sooner than later, kicking their feet up into the sky until that becomes repetitive and Tommy skids his feet against the woodchips to slow down. He sighs.

“This is boring,” Tommy says. “I’m bored.”

“You remind me of Tinkerbell,” Ranboo says. It’s completely out of the blue, and Tommy whips around to look at him.

“Pardon?” He blinks. “The fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Well—” Ranboo falters, then gestures. “Her whole thing in the movie is she can only feel one emotion at once, right? You kinda, like, remind me of that.”

“The fuck is *that* supposed to mean?” Tommy repeats, a little more upset now.

“It’s not a bad thing!” Ranboo says, rolling his eyes. “Well. It’s just interesting. You get preachy, man.”

“I’m not fuckin’ religious,” Tommy says.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it,” Ranboo counters, leveling him in a look. Tommy returns it easily. “Okay, so, you’re bored.”

“Let’s go get snacks,” Tommy demands, moving to stand up and off the swings in one big push. His feet thud against the wood chips and Ranboo lands next to him, decidedly more wobbly than Tommy. Tommy reaches out and takes advantage of that, shoving him to the side and laughing as he staggers sideways.

“Dude!” Ranboo calls, and Tommy just laughs, swinging one leg out and turning around toward the playground gates.

“Come on, pussy,” he calls back, and Ranboo scoffs, but jogs to catch up with him anyways.

“What’s with you?” Ranboo asks, and Tommy glances over, stuffing his hands into his pockets as they walk. “Today?”

“Well, I dunno, my friend just called me a *fairy*—”

“Other than that.” Ranboo snickers, and Tommy cracks a grin. Then he sobers up, and quickly. “Is everything okay?”

Everything is fine. Why is everyone asking him if he’s okay? Tommy scowls, turning his head away from Ranboo and staring down the road. There’s a 7/11 down just a bit farther, and he can already taste the stale air and feel the cool linoleum under his feet. “It’s fine,” he says. Then, a beat later: “Did I tell you I got fired?”

“Oh.” Ranboo falters. “No.”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry?”

“Why’re you phrasing it as a question,” Tommy snaps, turning back slightly. “Dickhead. Be sorry or not.”

“Sorry,” Ranboo says emphatically. “Jeez.”

Well, dammit. Now Tommy feels bad. “No, I’m sorry,” he says with a sigh. “Just– touchy subject.”

“What happened?” Oh boy, does Tommy *not* want to get into it.

“Management and I disagreed,” he manages to say, and Ranboo takes that as the obvious cue to change the subject.

“Oh,” he says. “Well. Sorry?”

“Whatever,” Tommy says, throwing a hand in the air. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t need it anymore, anyways.”

“What is with that, by the way?” Ranboo asks. “You... moved. People pick you up now.”

“I–” Tommy’s mouth twists as he tries to figure out what to say, and decides on a little white lie overthreading the entire truth. He can’t tell Ranboo the whole truth; he never can and never will, because Ranboo is a bleeding heart and Tommy is pretty sure he’d give the guy a hemorrhage if he explained it all to him. So he softens the blows, puts water in vodka to take the bite off the real story. “I met this guy at work, Wilbur. He and his family are–” *murderers* , “–really nice. And Dream wasn’t–” *a good guardian* , “–making enough anymore to keep the house afloat without my help, and it was getting–” *seriously dangerous* , “–stressful, so Wilbur offered to let me stay with him and his family for a while so Dream can–” *die* , “–handle things on his own. I’m okay. It’s just a lot.”

It’s not often that Tommy is candid with Ranboo, so thankfully, whenever he pretends to be, the other takes it as the truth. He nods seriously as Tommy explains the diner and moving out and how now they’re providing for him, kind of like a foster family but unofficial.

“And they’re nice?” Ranboo asks hesitantly, once Tommy’s done pouring his heart out like honey onto the sidewalk.

“They’d kill for me,” Tommy says, completely assured of that fact. Ranboo stares at him, then looks away and down at his feet with a shy little grin.

“As long as you’re happy,” he says, then scoffs. “But a *Tesla*? Really?”

“I know,” Tommy groans. “I feel like a posh dickhead.”

“It’s kind of cool,” Ranboo admits, and Tommy grins at him.

“Yeah, it kind of is,” he concedes. Because it is. He likes the weird futuristic tech of it all, the way people look at them out in public like they’re jealous. Also, it’s better for the environment, and Tommy does love the environment.

7/11's doorbell rings as they push through the entrance, Ranboo behind Tommy as they both step into the air-conditioned space and the smell of stale hotdogs and window cleaner burns in their noses. Tommy immediately dials in on the snack aisle, the cashier poking their head out from the back for a split second before disappearing again, neck craned and clearly on their phone. They browse for a minute, splitting up as Ranboo ducks down a separate aisle and then comes out the other side, both with snacks in hand. Tommy's got a bag of chips and Ranboo's got gummy worms— they pop open one of the freezers and Tommy snags a Gatorade. Ranboo takes too fucking long to pick his drink, so Tommy leaves him there and meanders around the prepared food section for a minute before snagging a premade sandwich to go with his chips. He'll ruin his appetite for dinner, but that's okay— he has a lot of homework he can just use as an excuse to skip it, no matter how much Phil insists they eat together as a family. He's been trying harder, lately, ever since Tommy got fired. It's kind of nice. Meeting halfway can't be all that bad, Tommy thinks, staring down at his items in hand and then back up at the empty register.

His eyes flick to the ceiling, and the busted cameras there. No way they work— they hang limp from the stained tile next to the fluorescent bulbs, no wires coming out of the back of them. The cashier isn't even behind the register anymore, and there are no cars out by the pumps.

"You ready?" Ranboo asks, coming around the corner and startling him. Tommy jumps slightly— he's been more flinchy ever since the whole murder thing came out— and turns to face him.

"I'm Tinkerbell," he says. Ranboo stares at him, opening his mouth and then shutting it.

"What?" he finally manages to ask

"I'm Tinkerbell," Tommy insists, and then takes a step or two backwards behind the shelves of the aisles and pulls Ranboo down a little bit, lowering his voice. "And I'm feeling miss-che-vious."

"Okay?" Ranboo whispers back to him. He's got Arizona Iced Tea in hand. Tommy scoffs at his choice. "So?"

"So..." Tommy jerks his head towards the register. "No one's looking. We bolt out the door and these come free of charge." He shakes his bottle of Gatorade lightly. Ranboo's jaw drops open.

"Steal?" he whispers furiously, and Tommy shushes him. "Tommy, it's like five bucks, it's not even worth it."

"You make a fair point," Tommy says, because he does, "but I'm unemployed now, which means finances are tight. Also, it'd be fun. Come on. What're they gonna do, call the cops?"

"They have cameras," Ranboo whispers.

"Not working ones," Tommy tells him. "Just— run with me. If I run, you have to too, or else you're an accessory."

“Or I get acquitted because I gave you up,” Ranboo hisses, and Tommy rolls his eyes.

“You would never,” he says. Utterly convinced, too. “We’re best friends.”

“Not when you steal!”

“Just this once? Please? For the adrenaline, king. It’s a rush.” He can remember it now, the heady, floaty feeling of creeping into a place he doesn’t belong and taking something that isn’t his. Stealing the laptop had been fun, but the consequences had been bigger than he’d expected. This is different. The consequences for this? Surely insignificant. Besides, with the whole murder thing he’s sure the Watson-Soots have a working knowledge of police systems and could get him out with ease. Ranboo looks conflicted as Tommy postulates the idea, and he lets himself feel the flood of energy that comes with crime, bouncing on his toes. Before Ranboo can even answer, he continues: “I’m gonna do it. With or without you. On the count of three—”

“Tommy—”

“Run with me. One, two—”

“Tommy!”

“Three.” On his word, he turns back into the aisle and beelines for the door. Hiding his goodies on the side farthest from the register, he walks with purpose, head held high and eyes on the bell above the entryway. There’s a pause, and then Ranboo’s footsteps follow him, unsure and unsteady. Tommy ignores them— he reaches the door and pushes it open in one swift movement, stepping outside into the afternoon air and hearing the bell jingle. Behind him, Ranboo lets out a small, uncertain curse just before the cashier’s voice rings out—

“Hey!” Tommy breaks into a run, crushing his drink and snacks to his chest as he grins and bolts down the sidewalk. He can hear Ranboo behind him and a quick glance over his shoulder confirms what he’d thought— his friend is following, a worried look on his face, but the cashier hasn’t even left the store. They run, racing down the pavement and Tommy takes a hard left, throwing himself into a suburban neighborhood he doesn’t recognize but doesn’t care to try and figure out, weaving through streets with a laugh and his prize clutched to his chest. It’s adrenaline, through and through— not the angry kind, but the good kind, the kind that makes him wheeze in delight when they finally stop and he lets his goodies spill to the ground, bending over with his hands on his knees as he gasps for air. Ranboo skids to a stop behind him, nearly crashing into him as they pause beneath a stop sign and both of them breathe hard, not really used to the exercise. Once Tommy’s caught some of his breath he lifts his head and whoops, ignoring the fact they’re in the middle of a neighborhood and instead letting the curling, rotting feeling in his chest loose. It’s a piece of phlegm caught in the back of his throat, poisoned and raw that feels less and less present by the second. It’s been there since he’d seen the murder site and the conversations about death between Techno and Wilbur— it’s been there since the car talk with Phil, but now it slips free and he hacks it out of his chest with his own hands, regaining some form of control.

He tears open the Gatorade, sipping it greedily and turning to grin at Ranboo.

“Here,” he says. “Electrolytes.”

“Are you kidding me?” Ranboo gasps, tilting his face up to glare at him. Only then does Tommy notice Ranboo’s hands are empty. “Tommy!”

“What?” he asks, taking another sip of his drink. “Fine, I’ll keep it. Do you not like blue Gatorade?”

“You stole that!” Ranboo says. Tommy snorts.

“No shit, Sherlock,” he says. “You’re so ass-tute. Where’d your stuff go?”

“I left it,” Ranboo says. “Because I’m not going to steal things. You have money. I have money. We could’ve paid.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Tommy asks, downing another sip of Gatorade. He spins on his heel, collecting the rest of his items and then meandering down the road. He glances over his shoulder to find Ranboo following, albeit slowly. “C’mon. It’s fine.”

Silent, Ranboo keeps up.

“Don’t be a bitch about this,” Tommy says defensively. “C’mon.” Tearing open his chips, he holds the bag out as a quiet peace offering.

Ranboo takes a chip.

Things progress, after that. Ranboo is quieter around him, a listener instead of a speaker. Tommy finds it intriguing, but he doesn’t think about it too much— he lives on, because he has to. Nothing changes much with Wilbur or Techno, or even Phil. Tommy is happy, but there is the bitter reminder of Dream every time he passes his old neighborhood. It’s like a leech on his life, and soon enough it’s consuming his mind, flowers blooming in every wrinkle of his brain with Dream’s face plastered on all of them. Things are good, he convinces himself. Blond men he sees in the corner of his vision make him flinch, but he’s fine.

Wilbur is affectionate and loud and good for a distraction, but it’s only a matter of time until something bubbles over.

The Watson-Soots don’t lock their liquor cabinet.

“Ranboo,” Tommy says, skidding up next to his best friend. It’s a school day, Thursday rolling around to an end. He knows Ranboo has a study hall last period and is able to leave early, so Tommy had skipped out of his own last class with a plan in mind to help burn those flowers to a crisp. He needs to be rid of the reminders, and maybe remind Dream that he’s

still a threat and willing to act. The boy in front of him startles when Tommy calls his name, then narrows his eyes.

“Tommy,” he says warily. “Aren’t you supposed to still be in Chem—”

“ You got a car for your birthday. Can you drive?”

“What?” Ranboo blinks, startled out of his apparent confusion. “I mean, I have my license, but—?”

“Good.” Tommy throws his backpack down on the ground and it clinks. “I need you to drive me home.”

“I’m not supposed to drive anyone else,” Ranboo says, a bit sheepish, and Tommy sticks out his lower lip and stares up at him. “It’s not gonna work.”

“Just drive me to Dream’s house,” Tommy requests, sticking his lip out a bit further. Ranboo chews on his own, fingers gripping the straps of his backpack. “I’ll pay you money. That’s a lie— I’ll buy you something, I dunno. Life debt. Please?”

“...fine, sure, whatever.” Ranboo sighs. “Fine. But that’s it. Dream’s house. Nowhere else. Okay?”

Tommy grins. “Okay.”

They make it to Dream’s house, fucking finally. There’s a *for-sale* sign in the front yard, swinging absently in the breeze. Tommy stares for a moment as Ranboo pulls up alongside the curb, and then looks down at his backpack. Anger curls in his gut whenever he looks at the house, thinking of all the shit he went through there. Righteous anger, he knows it is, because he didn’t deserve all that.

“Why are we here?” Ranboo finally asks, fingers tapping nervously on the steering wheel. “Didn’t you move?”

“Something like that,” Tommy grunts, unzipping his bag and pulling out a bottle of—

“Is that *vodka*? ” Ranboo shrieks. Tommy glances upwards, shoves a finger against his lips.

“Shh!” he says. Ranboo snaps his mouth shut and stares, but Tommy just uncaps the thing and pulls out a bundle of ripped t-shirt from his bag. Ranboo breaks the silence again.

“Oh no,” he says, but Tommy’s already unlatched the door and is stuffing the rag into the top of the bottle. He’s angry enough to light the thing himself, sparks flying. “No no no, Tommy, no—” Ranboo’s voice fades into background noise as he marches up the front lawn, fumbling in his pocket and pulling out his bright red lighter. Ranboo’s voice is more and more panicked in his peripheral, but he just flicks it until it lights and holds the lighter to the rag. When he glances back, Ranboo is still in the car— good.

Tommy turns, and eyes the windows. He only has a second to choose, and he does, throwing the bottle towards the window closest to the door. It arcs through the air— he thinks he hears Ranboo gasp— and smashes, perfectly on-target. The window breaks, and liquid fire spills out across the paneling, and inside, something catches alight. The smoke puffs up and Tommy whoops, turning on his heel and vibrating as he throws himself back into the passenger seat.

“What the fuck did you do?” Ranboo cries out, but Tommy just fumbles with his seatbelt and whoops again.

“Go go go go!” he shouts, reaching over and slamming his open palm against the steering wheel. “Go, Ranboo, fucking go!”

“I’m going!” Ranboo shouts back, and he slams his foot down on the gas. They peel away from the curb, Tommy whooping and shouting and jeering all the while as behind them, the house catches flame.

It’s exhilarating. It’s freeing. Tommy has never felt more *alive* .

“Why the hell did you do that?” Ranboo is blubbing in the seat next to him, taking corners dangerously fast and vibrating just as much as Tommy is. “Tommy, *why the hell did you do that?* Am I your— oh my god, I’m your getaway driver.”

“Ye-up. And you’re doing a great job.” Tommy reaches out and pats him on the shoulder with trembling fingers, adrenaline coursing through his veins as Ranboo keeps driving, hunched over in his seat with a wild and angry look in his eyes. Tommy catches his gaze for a brief moment, and he lets his hand linger on his shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“You better be!” Ranboo says, high-pitched and frantic. “If we get arrested—”

“No, no—” Tommy cuts him off with a wave of his hand. “Not for this. This is great. This is amazing, that felt so fucking good you have no idea— I’m sorry about before. You were right. I was being a bitch about the stealing thing.”

“Now is not the time,” Ranboo grits out, knuckles white.

“No, I really think it is,” Tommy says pleasantly. “I’m sorry, Ranboo.”

Ranboo’s face twists like he’s just bitten into a lemon, but eventually, finally, he says: “I forgive you.”

“Oh, thank god.”

“For *that* . For that! Not for this! What the heck are we gonna do?”

Tommy leans back in his seat, kicking his feet up onto the dash. “Well, you’re gonna keep driving. And we’re going to go back to my house, and have an alibi saying we were there since school ended.”

“We don’t have an alibi,” Ranboo says, again through gritted teeth. “And what if someone saw my car? Or— or we have our phones on us, they can track us with our phones.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Tommy says, checking his nails and then sitting up once more in order to zip up his bag and make sure nothing spilled in the car. All clear. He grins, glancing over. “Seriously, boober. Chill out. We’re gonna be fine. If anything does happen, Phil will take care of it.”

“You’re putting a lot of trust in a guy you barely know,” Ranboo snaps, and Tommy rolls his eyes.

“I’ve been living with him for like, ages now,” he points out. “I think I know him.”

“I still think it’s weird,” Ranboo grumbles, hunching over his seat. He’s sweating— so is Tommy, but he is less nervous and more exhilarated. Somewhere in the distance, the familiar sound of sirens start up. Ranboo just hunches further over.

“Just get us home, big man,” Tommy says, slapping him on the back and watching him flinch. “I’m serious. Don’t worry about it. They’ll cover for us.”

“You’re insane,” Ranboo mutters, but he’s driving towards the Watson-Soot house anyway. “Why did you even do this? The— the money? Why?”

“It’s not about that,” Tommy says defensively, shrinking in his seat. Ranboo glares over at him.

“What is it about then?” Ranboo asks. “Because I don’t get it.”

“It’s fun,” Tommy says, trying for amusement. “Funny.”

“It’s dangerous,” Ranboo counters. “You’re being dangerous. First you lost your job at the diner, the stealing, and Jack said—”

“Oh, sure, believe everything Jack says,” Tommy spits. “Fucking bastard.”

“—someone shattered a glass, and I don’t know what’s with you but ever since you came back from that concussion you’ve been acting weird and *violent* . I don’t like it.”

“Well I don’t like you,” Tommy says, curling up on himself like a coiled snake, defensive and rattling. His teeth bare. “Why’re you asking so many questions, huh?”

“Because I care about you?” Ranboo says, fingers tight on the wheel. “My friend?”

“Well if you care, you can fuck off and not ask about it,” Tommy snaps.

“I’m going to ask if you’re going to make me complicit in things like this,” Ranboo says back, and then they’re drifting towards the side of the road, skidding to a stop. Tommy blinks, glancing over. “It’s not cool, man.”

“Well, maybe you’re just a loser,” Tommy bites. “A loser who’s too afraid of getting his hands dirty to have any *fun* .”

“I am not a loser,” Ranboo says, hurt flashing across his face.

“Really?” Tommy asks. “Because you’re acting like one.”

“And you’re acting like a jerk,” Ranboo tells him.

“So’re you,” Tommy says. “Just play along, man, it’s fucking fun—”

“It’s not fun! Stop saying that! What is wrong with you?” Ranboo cries, turning in his seat to face him. “Something’s wrong and I want to help, Tommy, but I can’t if you keep acting like—”

“Like what?” Tommy asks, scowling and leaning towards him. “Angry? Maybe I don’t want your help, you fucking boob. You are a loser. I’m friends with you because it’s easy but apparently not as much as I thought because now you’re being a bitch and refusing to have fun. We’re teenagers, it’s not like this is the end of the fucking world.”

“Yes it is!” Ranboo throws a hand in the air. “It’s an arson charge!”

“You are such a fucking buzzkill,” Tommy snaps, and Ranboo steps backwards, flinching slightly. He hunches inwards, and Tommy stops with a start, realizing he’d been leaning forward to match Ranboo leaning back. Both of them freeze, caught on a strange sort of precipice made of sharpened glass— it cuts their feet, makes them bleed.

Then Ranboo steps off.

“I’m done hanging out,” he says weakly, straightening back up and unlocking the door with a shaking finger. “Get— get out of my car. I might be a loser for it, but I don’t think this is fun. And I don’t think you’re being very nice right now either.”

Tommy snaps. “Nice to learn where your priorities lie, dickhead.”

“Yeah,” Ranboo says, something strange and frightening dawning on his face. Understanding. “It is nice. Bye, Tommy.”

Tommy gracefully flips him the bird as he grabs his shit and throws himself out of the car, tension taut like a string between his lungs and heart. He’s breathing heavily, fingers gripping the backpack strap in his hands like it’s a lifeline until Ranboo disappears around a corner. Only then does he let his emotions show, and in a spiraling display of violence, he chucks his bag so hard his water bottle inside splits open against the pavement, an arc of the drink splashing onto the ground while the rest leeches out into a puddle on the side of the road. Tommy stands there for a long, long time, watching it pool and curls into the cracks in the asphalt around his bag. Eventually, a trail of it reaches the drain, dripping into the abyss.

“Fuck,” Tommy mutters, pressing his hands to his face until he sees starbursts on the back of his eyes. “Fuck!”

Eventually, he calls Wilbur to take him home.

At school the next day, Ranboo ignores him.

Ranboo ignores him every day after, too.

End Notes

updates will be posted weekly! :)

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